

VZCZCXR05386
PP RUEHDBU RUEHPW RUEHSL
DE RUEHBUL #2039/01 2050847
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 240847Z JUL 09
FM AMEMBASSY KABUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0362
INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 002039

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM AF

SUBJECT: SOLANA VISIT HIGHLIGHTS EU INTEREST IN ELECTION ISSUES

REF: A. KABUL 1925

1B. KABUL 0309

1C. 08 KABUL 2173

11. Summary: With four weeks left in the Afghan presidential campaign period, the international community's efforts to demonstrate impartiality in and support for elections are underscored by high-level visits and meetings with multiple presidential candidates. On July 22, EU Special Representative Ambassador Ettore Sequi briefed EU Ambassadors and Ambassador Carney on key issues discussed earlier in the day by EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana with Afghan leaders President Karzai and Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr. Rangin Spanta. Solana's highlights included the human rights case of Parwez Kambakhsh, election security and the role of Pakistan. Media reporting centered on Solana's engagement with presidential candidates Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, Ashraf Ghani and Mirwais Yaseni, the most prominent candidates, and his message that the EU supports free, fair and transparent elections in Afghanistan. End Summary.

Election Security

12. EUSR Solana had an in-depth discussion on elections with FM Spanta focusing on the security challenges facing the process. Solana expressed concern that over 1200 of Independent Election Commission's (IEC) 6966 proposed polling centers - located almost exclusively in Pashtun areas - are unlikely to open for security reasons and will likely be co-located to higher populated areas (ref A). Spanta stressed the dangers of Pashtun disenfranchisement from the electoral process and the election results; he argued that ISAF troops should help ensure security in the affected districts. (Note: Since this meeting ISAF has directed Regional Commands to urgently and decisively partner with ANSF to complete security assessments on the 1242 polling centers in insecure regions. End Note)

13. According to Sequi, Spanta in a line we have now heard frequently from Pashtun politicians, fervently argued that Afghan government officials agree that the failure of Pashtuns to vote would result in disaster. In a separate meeting, Karzai confirmed this point, seconding Spanta's call for ISAF support. Karzai told Solana that election credibility has two parts: the Afghan effort and the international effort. He explained that the latter means ISAF and PRTs must "act," particularly in the southeast and southwest. ISAF, in coordination with Afghan National Security Forces, is conducting shaping operations in select closed districts. However, ISAF and the international community continue to walk a fine line between ensuring the election retains its Afghan led focus and providing necessary support. (Comment: The 1242 polling centers are in sparsely populated regions and make up less than 10% of the Pashtun vote and less than 4% of the total Afghan vote, but the optics are important. End Comment)

Focusing on Pakistan

¶4. Karzai also raised the topic of Pakistan with Solana, insisting that Pakistan is central to the Afghanistan situation. He noted that although he is "happy" with President Zardari it is evident that Zardari is not in control of the country. Karzai told Solana that Taliban are appearing outside their usual areas of operation.

¶5. Spanta also ventured into a discussion of regional issues, centering on Pakistan. Spanta believed there is a need to ask Pakistan for assistance to ensure a good electoral process in Afghanistan. He contended to Solana that "good" and "bad" Taliban exist, with the latter Pakistani and the former, those protected by Pakistan's ISI.

Human Rights

¶6. Solana raised the situation of Parwez Kambakhsh, the journalism student serving a 20-year prison sentence for disseminating an article discussing women's rights and Islam (ref B). Karzai continued to backtrack from previous promises, including to U.S. CODELS, to pardon Kambakhsh (ref C). He said he recognized the importance of the problem and that a resolution be found, but that the elections must take place first or "major problems would result."

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Media Focus

¶7. Local media reports on Solana's visit focused on his meetings with leading presidential candidates Abdullah, Ghani and Yaseni in addition to Karzai. Solana told media that his engagement with candidates was aimed at familiarizing himself with their policies and that he had met only four candidates - not the full 41 - due to his limited time in Afghanistan. Solana also highlighted the EU's election observation mission, noting this as important support mechanism for ensuring that the election is free and fair.

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